

5000 West

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Where Valor Proudly Sleeps... Tomb of the



The prestigious responsibility of both guarding the Tomb of the Unknowns and escorting deceased Army service members to their final rest is that of the “Old Guard” (3rd U.S. Army Infantry). This regiment is one of the oldest and most respected infantry regiments in the United States Army. It also serves as the Army’s ceremonial unit, and this well-trained regiment is responsible for the protection of Washington, DC.

There is tradition and reason for every move these elite sentinels make as they guard the Tomb of the Unknowns. The guard walks past the final resting places of the Unknown Soldiers of World War I, World War II, Korea and the crypt of the Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War.

The remains of the Vietnam Unknown were identified as 1st Lt. Michael J. Blassie, USAF and disinterred on May 14, 1998 at his family’s request. The crypt remains empty and has been replaced with a memorial marker which says, “Honoring and keeping the faith with America’s missing Servicemen 1958-1975.”

The sentinel takes 21 steps during his walk across the Tomb to replicate the twenty-one-gun salute, the highest honor given any military or foreign dignitary. He also hesitates 21 seconds with a crisp turn, he turns 90 degrees to face east for 21 seconds. He then turns a sharp 90 degrees again to face north for 21 seconds. A crisp “shoulder-arms” movement places the rifle on the shoulder nearest the visitors to signify that the sentinel stands between the tomb and any threat. After the moment, the sentinel paces 21 steps north, turns and repeats the process. The practiced cadence is timed so that the sentinel paces at a rate of 90 steps each minute.

Tomb guards are changed every thirty minutes between 8 a.m. and 7 p.m. during the period from April 1 through September 30 and every hour between 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the year. At all other times (i.e., while the cemetery is closed), the guard is changed every two hours. The Tomb has been patrolled continuously since 1930.

Both genders may apply for the privilege of duty at the Tomb. The applicant must be between 5’ 10” and 6’ 2” tall and the waist size cannot exceed 30 inches. The current Commander of the Guards is Cpt. Carrie Wibben. Guards do not have to commit to serving there for any fixed period, and the average tour of duty is

continued ↪

Unknowns

about two years. Tomb guards may live either on-post (at nearby Fort Myer) or off-post in housing of their choosing. A soldier wishing to become a sentinel must undergo rigorous training, including several hours a day of marching, rifle drill and uniform preparation, and every tomb sentinel is expected to be completely versed in the history of both the tomb and of Arlington National Cemetery (including knowing how to find the graves of nearly 300 veterans buried there). They do not necessarily have a lot of free time to devote to recreational activities.

The Tomb Guard Identification Badge, first awarded in 1957, is an honor for which a guard qualifies by “flawlessly performing his duty for several months” and passing a test, not something simply handed out to everyone who serves for a given period.

Once the sentinel has completed his or her training, he or she must first pass a written examination of 100 questions about Arlington National Cemetery, and then be evaluated on proficiency in keeping watch at the Tomb.

Upon successful completion, the soldier is awarded a temporary Tomb Guard’s Badge at a ceremony presided over by the company commander. The badge is one of the Army’s

higher honors and can be taken away from the soldier if he or she does not continue to maintain the highest military standards. The award is, as its name states, a badge worn on the pocket of a uniform jacket – 527 have been awarded to date.

...the highest honor that can be afforded to a serviceperson.

The Tomb Guard Identification Badge is one of the least awarded badges in the Army, second only to the Astronaut Badge. Since the sentinels are held to such a high standard, if they ever do anything that is deemed behavior unbecoming a Tomb Guard or brings dishonor upon the Tomb, their badges may be revoked, even after the sentinels have left active duty military service.

In 2003 as Hurricane Isabelle was approaching Washington, DC, our US Senate/House took two days off with anticipation of the storm. On the ABC evening news, it was reported that

because of the dangers from the hurricane, the military members assigned the duty of guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers were given permission to suspend the assignment. They respectfully declined the offer, “No way, Sir!” Soaked to the skin, marching in the pelting rain of a tropical storm, they said that guarding the Tomb was not just an assignment; it was the highest honor that can be afforded to a serviceperson.

Setting it straight – This story has been amended to correct inaccuracies that were previously reported. I regret the misinformation.
– Editor



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The community relations office publishes *5000 West* bi-weekly as a channel of communication for employees, volunteers, patients and friends. *5000 West* is committed to enhancing the image of the Medical Center and its employees and volunteers through information, recognition and entertainment.

Articles of interest are welcome. The editor reserves the right to use and edit contributed stories. Submission deadline is two days prior to publication. Your comments are encouraged and should be directed to editor (00Z) 5000 West, VA Medical Center, Milwaukee, WI 53295: telephone (414) 382-5363 or (888) 469-6614, extension 45363 or e-mail john.zewiske@med.va.gov

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